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FOREWORD

War invalidates human life, even more so when it's waged without rules. Russia is using war crimes as a means of warfare. Through pain and suffering, this country is trying to crush the resistance of local people, in order to maintain its control over the territories it occupies.

Because of this, it's vital to give those who've survived Russian occupation the opportunity to be heard. Their voice often lacks volume amid international politicians' claims to "give the occupied territories" to the aggressor country to satisfy its imperial appetites — in the name of "peace." The voices of survivors show us that such claims are immoral.

Peace doesn't come when a country that is being attacked lays down its weapons. This would be not peace but occupation. And occupation is just another form of war.

I know what I'm talking about, as I've been documenting Russia's war crimes since 2014. After it annexed Crimea and occupied parts of Eastern Ukraine, Russia turned these territories into an experimental testing ground for forced assimilation and near-absolute suppression of freedom. On these territories, they've carried out such methods as terror and

violence, imposition of Russian culture, and the forced expulsion of locals.

It happens as follows. After occupying a town or a village, Russians identify and execute proactive people to prevent self-organization of local communities. Russian military and special forces hunt mayors, journalists, volunteers, teachers, priests, artists, and other engaged citizens. Basements of administrative buildings and factories are quickly turned into torture chambers. Russians build the necessary infrastructure for unlawful detention, where human life has no value. In these places, pregnant women and gray-haired men are raped, hung head down, electrocuted, have their nails pulled out or limbs cut out. The knowledge of such inhumane treatment alone helps hold the grip on people.

People living on occupied territories have no opportunities to protect themselves, their freedom, their belongings, their life, and their loved ones.

Neither Russian ballet nor Dostoevskii's body of work prevent Russians from committing atrocities. On the contrary, Russians use culture as a weapon to dominate and destroy other cultures. They claim Ukrainian culture and Ukrainian people to be non-existent. It's this statement that speaks most clearly about their genocidal aim to make this a reality by eliminating all dissenters.

It's no coincidence that Russian tanks arrive first, and then billboards with Pushkin follow. These are a sort of "signposts" used by the Russian empire to mark the territories they've

captured by force. Under occupation, the Ukrainian language and symbols are banned, while Kremlin state ideology is being forced onto children under the pretense of history. Since kindergarten, they prepare Ukrainian children for war and raise them in hate and even disgust at everything Ukrainian.

While foreign experts discuss if what's happening on the occupied territories can be called genocide, Russians are deporting Ukrainian children to Russia to raise them as Russian. To destroy a national group, you don't necessarily have to kill all its members: you can coerce them into having another identity.

To speed up these processes and solidify its imperial conquests, Russians are carrying out artificial population replacements. During all these years, government programs to populate the occupied Crimean peninsula with Russians from different regions of Russia have been taking place. At the same time, Ukrainian people are leaving their homes because of the dangers that come with occupation. If the process of colonization is not stopped, there will be an artificially formed homogenous Russian majority in these areas.

Since the full-scale invasion, Russia has been applying all these means of war on the occupied territories. When the Russian army was pushed back from Kyiv, towns and villages around the capital were liberated quite rapidly, not leaving the Russians a chance to hide the traces of their crimes. Photographs of Ukrainian civilians killed by Russians, whose bodies were lying on the streets for weeks until the suburbs of Kyiv were liberated, were picked up by media sources around the

globe. They remind the world that all the accomplishments of civilization — from the UN system to innovative technologies — still can't protect human life and dignity.

The book that is in front of you is about people and their experiences. It shows that people in Ukraine are fighting not only for their land but also for their people, living on this land. It shows that only via spreading freedom, can we make the world safer.

Oleksandra Matviichuk
human rights activist,
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PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

In 2022, we traveled across the liberated towns and villages of Ukraine and recorded stories of people who survived Russian occupation. When the world had its eyes on President Zelenskyy who said “I need ammunition, not a ride,” rejecting offers to evacuate at the beginning of the full-scale war, Ukrainians across the country were cooperating in sync, often without any strategic oversight, because the Russian invaders systematically cut their access to information.

Every voice of the people who lived under occupation is a survivor testimony, although not everyone was lucky enough to survive. If the Ukrainian Armed Forces hadn't liberated — de-occupied — these territories, these stories of resistance could have never been told, let alone be translated for the world to read.

This book tells the stories of the ordinary people who, in the darkest of times, took matters into their own hands to resist occupation and fight for a free Ukraine. Most of them were regular civilians who became part of the resistance. They risked their lives and liberty in order to be free.

In 2025, when the Russian propaganda machine is so strong that it has the new US administration spreading lies about

what's happening on the Ukrainian front, these voices from the towns and villages of Ukraine need to be amplified. They speak of universal virtues: human dignity, the power of resistance, and a readiness to stand up to evil wherever it casts its shadow.

When I was writing this book, I thought that we were on the cusp of a new stage of the war: the liberation of all our territories from Russian occupation. Many towns and villages had been de-occupied, the Russians were retreating, and locals were taking out their once carefully hidden yellow and blue flags to greet the Ukrainian soldiers who had finally come to liberate them. But three years have passed since then, and the rapid progress of de-occupation that we witnessed back then has all but stopped.

Russian occupation is still a reality for many Ukrainians, and the number of Ukrainians under Russian occupation only grows as their army advances deeper into our country. There are hundreds of stories behind each newly occupied town. They are not stories of freedom. They are stories of fear: repressions, the destruction of homes, torture, and forced expulsion. Ukrainians are again being left alone to face the atrocities of the invading Russian army. While they live — and die — under Russian occupation, their voices remain silent.

This book exists to amplify the voices of the Ukrainians who are once again free to speak. They speak while those in the cities, towns, and villages that have not yet been de-occupied wait. One day, their silence too will be broken, and they will share their stories of resistance.

You might be wondering, why do they use the word “de-occupied,” and not “liberated”? In Ukrainian, it’s not the same word as “liberated,” a distinction we as Ukrainians make, as we’ve come to understand that we never know how many times we’ll need, again and again, to de-occupy our land, to free our people. This is our pain that never ends; our silence that we hope, will one day become a proud voice.

Bogdan Logvynenko,
March 2025